

Marge Kars, Lynda M. Baker, and Feleta L. Wilson (eds.), **The Medical Library Association Guide to Health Literacy**, Neal-Schuman, New York (2008). ISBN 978-1-55570-625-8. 314 pp. \$75.00.

Health literacy is essential to effective navigation of complex health care systems, but people are often less health literate than they care to admit. Even well-educated individuals grapple with unfamiliar terms and concepts; functionally illiterate people are essentially cast to sea in a health care system that assumes more knowledge than many people possess. Librarians, particularly in hospital or public libraries, can play a vital role in improving the ability of all patients to understand their health. With this ability, hopefully, people's health care outcomes will improve.

The Medical Library Association Guide to Health Literacy, a compilation of insights from librarians with varied expertise in this field, is a practical and thorough resource for librarians who would like to improve their knowledge of health literacy; enhance their collections to meet the needs of specific populations; and understand how to identify the signs of low literacy that may impact the ability of people to absorb health information. People who always have a companion, or complain that they can't read because they left their glasses at home, could be hiding the fact that they have difficulty reading. Ideally in these circumstances, the librarian would be able to recommend easier reading materials that still convey the essential information regarding the patron's health concern. Such exchanges require great tact as well as a commitment to a thorough reference interview; in one chapter Karyn Prechtel, of the Pima County Public Library System in Tucson, AZ, offers excellent suggestions for how to accomplish both.

The book offers four sections: an overview of health literacy (including a thorough literature review); examinations of how concern with health literacy manifests itself with particular populations, such as senior citizens and teenagers; a particular focus on health literacy support in public and hospital libraries; and finally some suggestions about how more librarians can become involved in this important area. Every chapter has something to offer, and like all good reference works readers can comfortably skip what they are not interested in (that said, your intrepid reviewer read the entire book as a way to while away long plane rides).

The editors note at the beginning that they weren't seeking to present a thematically integrated work, but rather a volume that allows every contributor to present their own experiences. Of course, overlaps emerge; most authors cite standard definitions of health literacy, and almost as many describe the "teach back" method: a technique in which you ask people to explain a concept you've just presented, to ensure they understand what you meant. This is critical in accurately conveying health information. Of course (as Prechtel notes in her chapter on the reference interview), librarians must never cross the line into practicing medicine without a license. Although this seems obvious in the abstract, it can be very difficult in real life. People with health concerns are often emotionally distraught. They want practical advice, not just information. Librarians should be sympathetic, courteous, and helpful, while knowing where to draw the line.

Although librarians are not doctors, those with an interest in improving health literacy seem to be practicing a form of social work. Working with people who struggle to understand health

information is about much more than a dispassionate referral to an authoritative reference source. Such an emotionally charged role will not be comfortable for everyone...especially, perhaps, the readership of *JAL*. So while I can confidently proclaim that the *Guide to Health Literacy* is an excellent and comprehensive resource, it is not necessarily appropriate for academic library collections.

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